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Memorial reflections

Several area events honored fallen soldiers

The mournful notes of "Taps" wailed from a brass bugle, bringing tears to the eyes of some who paid their respects to fallen members of the military Monday at the Forest Meadows Cemetery.

The wind gently caressed rows and rows of small American flags mounted on the graves of the departed men and women who gave their lives in service of their country as a solemn and simple Memorial Day ceremony was celebrated at the cemetery's war memorial.

It was one of several Memorial Day celebrations in North Central Florida, which included programs in Gainesville, Camp Blanding, Lake City and Bushnell.

For retired U.S. Air Force Col. Alva Hoover of Gainesville, Memorial Day gives is an emotional time for him to reflect on the sacrifices of his comrades.

Dressed in his Air Force blues, the 82-year-old rose shakily and fervently saluted during the singing of the national anthem. Strangers came up to shake his hand and offer their praise for his years of service - one woman who approached him broke into tears recalling how her father, who recently died, served in World War II.

"I've lost so many comrades," Hoover said, his blue eyes glazing over as they stared into the distance.

"What the problem today is people don't understand what we have to sacrifice. This is a reminder of that. It's not something you can explain to someone who hasn't gone through it."

Amanda Garrigues, community services coordinator for Forest Meadows Funeral Home and Cemeteries, said there's more to Memorial Day than giving people a day off of work or an excuse to have a family barbecue.

"We want to reignite in the hearts and minds of those in the Gainesville community the true meaning of Memorial Day," Garrigues said. "It's a time to remember those who have died in service of our

country."

She added that the cemetery on SE Hawthorne Road is the only one within 100 miles that offers free burial space, which is normally more than \$1,000, for veterans who are registered beforehand with the funeral home.

Across town, more than 200 people, including several veterans in wheelchairs with IVs dangling alongside, crowded in front of the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Gainesville to pay tribute to the fallen, who were often referred to as "heroes."

Several people clutched American flags close to their hearts, others saluted and some wept as a scorching sun shined down during the presentation of colors by the Gator Detachment of the Marine Corps League. Alachua County commissioners, Gainesville representatives, law enforcement and fire officials were on hand for the ceremony, which specifically remembered those from the county who died in battle during every war from the Civil War up through Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The ceremony highlighted what Capt. Bill Pokorny Jr. called the most important and solemn day celebrated in the United States.

Pokorny, commanding officer of the Naval ROTC program at the University of Florida, said since most of the students in his unit are out of town, he encouraged them to celebrate and remember the reason for Memorial Day in their own communities.

"It's important we remember those veterans who have given all they have to preserve the life of freedom and liberty to which we've become accustomed," Pokorny said.

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